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## Zeitgeist Essay: In Teaching, Efficiency Isn't Sufficient

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# Zeitgeist Essay

This article introduces a new feature in Academic Exchange Quarterly – “Zeitgeist Essay.”

“Zeitgeist Essay” will feature explorations of compelling social and political issues of the day drawing attention to academic and other literature. To illustrate, the essay that follows examines one academic’s ambivalence about technology’s place in today’s classrooms. As the author, I seek to contribute to on-going explorations of the strengths and limits of instructional technologies. The essay suggests that, although e-learning and technology offer potentially significant pedagogical benefits, their use also risks gravely compromising the learning process. The essay concludes with a call to academics, policy makers, and the general public to think critically about what is required for pedagogical success in today’s diverse teaching and learning environments.

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## In Teaching, Efficiency Isn’t Sufficient

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When Sister Mary Ilene called the roll in her second-grade classroom more than 50 years ago and I answered “present,” without knowing it, I made a statement about my existence, location, and consciousness (awareness) – my presence. Now as I address students sitting in my classroom who intermittently peer out over the top of their laptop screens, or watch them slip from class in the middle of a lecture responding to their muted cell phones I wonder: Are they really present? Or are they sitting in class checking their email, surfing the Web, tweeting, texting, or obsessing over Facebook?[1] To be “present” today, in the virtual world, is to be available 24/7, interminably attached to a cellphone, Blackberry, iPAQ, iPad, or laptop.[2]

My point is that cellphones, Blackberries, iPAQs, iPads, and laptops, so helpful, so appealing, so seductive, are transforming us in profound ways. For example, these devices may allow us to fashion or reinforce intimate relationships, but perhaps at the expense of face-to-face relationships. Or they can disrupt family and work life.

By his own account 43 year old, father of two, entrepreneur Kord Campbell “struggles with the effects of the deluge of data. Even after he unplugs, he craves the stimulation he gets from his electronic gadgets. He forgets things like dinner plans, and he has trouble focusing on family.”[3] For some the Blackberry has become more than a tool or gadget. Have you ever heard someone called a “crackberry”? Communication can become an addiction; The New York Times notes that a Facebook addiction has led many to “unfriend Facebook.”[4]

Colleague Josina Makua advises me that my uneasiness is like that expressed by Plato in the “Phaedrus.” In that dialogue you hear Socrates maligning the written word. He suggests the written word is an inherently insidious form of communication because it debilitates the capacity of memory. It just sits there – we can’t query it. We can’t have a dialogue with it. Socrates insists that the written word should be fought by anyone who cares about philosophy.[5]

So there's Plato, who discovers his vocation to philosophy by reflecting on the life and teachings of Socrates, vilifying in writing the written word – the written word which to us has become so helpful, so appealing, and so seductive. Whereas today separated from Plato by two millennia, I am using a laptop to disparage the ubiquitous presence of technology. All of this makes me wonder if I should be a little more circumspect about my apprehensions. Maybe I should ask, what is it about e-learning and technology that can be beneficial, and how does it really compromise us?

I began to use Blackboard six or seven years ago. From Blackboard it was an easy step to using a laptop and e-texts in the classroom. While shying away from Powerpoint presentations, I quickly took to Microsoft Office Onenote Notebook. Microsoft suggested that I think of Onenote as the electronic equivalent of a paper notebook. Using a stylus to write on my laptop monitor, the program made it possible for me to project my lecture outline and notes onto the screen in front of the class. It offered me a sense of flexibility and freedom that Powerpoint did not. Furthermore, when combined with a wireless projection adaptor, Onenote left me free to walk around with laptop in hand outlining the lecture, highlighting comments, drawing pictures, or simply switching back and forth from the e-text used in the course to my lecture notes. Students commented that my lecture outlines and notes were easier to read. At the end of lecture I simply saved the day's work on my computer – no erasing the board. My lectures were enhanced and I was more efficient.

Last semester, with the help of Cynthia Compean, our Assistive Technology Specialist, I combined Onenote with Camtasia. Camtasia is screen-capture recording software. Now not only was I able to capture my lecture outline and class notes using Onenote, but Camtasia recorded and synchronized my voice with the material in Onenote. When I combined Onenote, Camtasia, and ilearn (the platform we currently use on campus), students gained access to the lecture anytime, anywhere. I was especially attracted by what this meant for intellectually and physically challenged students, who often needed to listen to the material a second time or had trouble taking notes.

Although these programs seemed to be a boundless resource, I became plagued by niggling second thoughts. Indeed, today I remain uneasy and unable to commit fully to the technology. Why? I wonder whether students would attend class if they could get the lectures on line. While these programs seemed ideal, one could end up holding a class for one or two students, or at worst, standing in the classroom alone. Am I being a Luddite, an obstructionist? How could I get in the way of something so beautiful, so efficient?

At the end of the semester I asked students to email me and tell me what they thought about the Camtasia program. All the comments were supportive. Ryan said, "I used Camtasia and found it useful because not only were the notes available for viewing later, but also having the commentary in addition to the notes increase[d] the overall usefulness of the program." Cynthia said, "I used the notes on ilearn and they were helpful to me because being able to view the notes and hear you go over them again help[ed] me to remember key points as well as help[ed] me to understand." Stephanie stated, "I was very disappointed that we didn't have it for the other exams. I would listen to the lectures and compare it to my notes. It was helpful being able to stop and rewind and see what you had said that I had not had time to write in class." Christopher advised, "I used it a few times, and it was a tremendous help, but if you did not attend class that day it would not be a sufficient replacement (but I have a feeling you like it better that way!)." So here we have before us an efficient and boundless resource. And yet, is efficiency the only or most important value driving education?

In *What is Living and What is Dead in Social Democracy?* Tony Judt insists that we are plagued by a common and contemporary prejudice – "the invocation of economics in all discussions of public affairs." Judt insists currently, "when we ask ourselves



whether we support a proposal or initiative, we have not asked, is it good or bad. Instead we inquire: Is it efficient? Would it benefit gross domestic product? Will it contribute to growth?" Judt warns, "this propensity to avoid moral considerations . . . to restrict ourselves to issues of profit and loss . . . is not instinctive. It is an acquired taste." [6]

Neil Postman insists that "in considering how to conduct the schooling of our young adults we have two problems to solve." One is technical, a problem of means, "an engineering problem." [7] How is it possible to create the same educational advantages for all individuals? While this technical question is itself formidable, the more fundamental and difficult problem is one of defining the value of education, or what "good" education serves. Is getting an education about attaining economic and social advancement – making a living? Or is education about making a life? [8] According to Postman, because today's society has failed to supply students with adequate reasons for going to college, they are academically disengaged. Record numbers of today's college freshman report feeling bored in class; they come to class late or leave early. [9]

According to Jacques Ellul, "there is a deep conviction that technical problems are the only serious ones." [10] He argues that we see this in the rejection of the humanities and the conviction held by all social classes that we are living in a technical age and education must relate. Hence, education has become market-driven; a majority of today's college students are career oriented. We hear this, I believe, in the chronic question: "What are you going to do with that major?"

Ellul writes about the morality imbedded in technology. He observes it is not an immorality imbedded in technology; rather, it is an absence of morality – amorality. Technology, he argues, is a phenomenon blind to good and evil. [11] I am reminded by Ellul's comments of debates surrounding technological interventions at the end of life, stem cell research, cloning, genetic engineering, and human reproduction. For example, although reproductive technology has enhanced the lives of many women (and men) who thought they were unable to have children, the Catholic Church insists that all techniques for controlling human reproduction are wrong. Whereas some argue that human reproductive technologies (surrogate pregnancy, sperm donors, artificial insemination) have led to the loss of personal values, others question whether artificial insemination will take the love out of reproduction and make it a purely mechanical process, and still others, that it will promote eugenics and denigrate the worth of babies.

Indeed, Hans Jonas insists in *The Imperative of Responsibility* that machines are so helpful, so appealing, so seductive that if we are not conscious of how we use them, when we use them, where we use them, they will indeed drive our ethic. Jonas argues that the human capacity to reason morally has not caught up with technological progress. If Judt, Postman, Ellul, and Jonas are correct, we have good reason to be suspicious of the movement toward using more and more technology in the classroom.

Although I grant that iLearn, Onenote, and Camtasia are important resources, I still maintain they can compromise teaching and student learning. In order to see how technology can compromise teaching and learning each of us has to ask ourselves, what are the ingredients required to succeed as a teacher – to say that I feel successful? What definition of success am I using?

I teach philosophy and social ethics. To the best of my ability I want to foster knowledge and skills that will lead my students to meaningful and successful lives. I want them to be able to ask the big questions, to know the big questions – to discover what questions are worth asking. I want them to be able to think deeply and, in conversing with one another, to contribute to the human dialogue about the purpose of life, about what is success.

In addition, I know that every single day of every single class is a unique experience. The class is a living breathing thing. It is organic. Everyone in the classroom knows this. As a result, my instruction will need to encompass more than skills; I will need to think deeply about character, culture, lifestyle, disposition, flexibility, risk-taking, and empathy. Students may go on line and view Camtasia but there is no way to replicate what happens in the classroom.

By focusing on efficiency or productivity, it is easy to overlook the more meaningful problem of how might technologies function to compromise my ability to serve the very mission that, for me, defines success in the classroom. I believe one answer is, to the extent that technology moves my students away from "presence" they are injured, not helped. As Christopher advises, "if you did not attend class that day, it [Camtasia] would not be a sufficient replacement."

Of course it may not be technology that is the problem; rather, it could be the use that I make of the technology that is problematic. Although I am suspicious of the movement to use more and more technology in the classroom, I still maintain that technology is an inevitable part of a world that is not static. Hence, I continue to consider new ways of implementing technology in my courses. For instance, I teach an introductory philosophy course, *Philosophy According to the Movies*. The course meets once a week for four hours. I have felt, for some time that the things I try to do in this class do not fit together in a coherent fashion.

Generally, I start lecture with questions, or by talking about a key question or theorist, once a number of issues are on the table we turn to a movie and come back to the discussion after the movie. My new, hopefully less disjointed, format will be to use ilearn and Camtasia to make my lectures available to the students before class. The students will be responsible for working their way through the reading with the help of the online lectures. That will leave classroom time for the movie, their questions, and discussion. If Christopher has it right and Camtasia is not a "sufficient replacement" for what goes on in the classroom this new format shouldn't be a problem.

#### Endnotes

- [1] Incidentally, 50 years ago I didn't need technology to disengage from the classroom day-dreaming worked just fine.
- [2] Berteaux, John. "Cost of connection." *The Monterey Country Herald* 24 June 2007: F1.
- [3] Richtel, Matt. "Hooded on Gadgets, and Paying a Mental Price." *The New York Times* 7 June 2010: A1.
- [4] Hafner, Katie. "Driven to Distraction, Some Unfriend Facebook." *The New York Times* 21 Dec. 2009: National: A14.
- [5] Jowett, Benjamin. "The Dialogues of Plato" *Encyclopedia Britannica: Great Books*. Ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins. 52 vols. Oxford University Press, 1952. 139.
- [6] Judt, Tony. "What Is Living and What Is Dead in Social Democracy?" *The New York Review of Books* December 2009: 86.
- [7] Postman, Neil. *The End of Education: Redefining The Value of School*. (New York: Vantage Press, 1955). 3.
- [8] Postman x.
- [9] Postman 4-18
- [10] Ellul, Jacques. *The Technological System*. (Toronto: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965). 97.
- [11] Ellul 98.